

The Sense(s) of Choosing Fruits & Vegetables



Going to the produce market is a mini-adventure: you're surrounded by vivid colors, countless shapes and textures, and exotic scents. And the best part is, you can eat everything you see!

When shopping for produce--especially new items you may not have tried before--make sure to use all of your senses to find the most delectable fruit or vegetable. The quality of your ingredients will determine the quality of your final dish! Here are some ways to make shopping for produce, fun and fruitful:

[See] Look for produce that is free of blemishes and dents. It's okay if it's misshapen as long as it grew that way (in fact, an oddly-shaped fruit or vegetable often makes a great garnish), but if it's flattened on one side, that means it's probably been dropped. Keep looking. And if you're not sure what color indicates ripeness of that particular fruit/vegetable, do a quick survey of the entire bin. What color do they collectively tend towards? In the case of tomatoes, you'll see that some are dark orange, some are red, and some deep red. Whatever color the produce seems to be heading towards is probably an indicator of that particular fruit or vegetable's final stage of ripeness. By the same token, you might see a few that are cracked or browning or show some other obvious signs of over-ripeness. Use that as a gauge as well.

[Hear] While you can't hear the ripeness of most produce, there are a few aural indicators in the fruit-and-veggie world. Two that immediately come to mind are coconuts and melons: coconuts should slosh because of the liquid inside and melons should sound dense when you tap them with your knuckles.

[Taste] Often, stores put out baskets or bowls of their fruits. (If you're really, really lucky, you might find cheese in another spot. Try pairing them!) Feel free to sample--that's why it's there.

[Smell] A market with fresh produce is better than the world's most expensive perfumery. Most fruits have a sweet smell as they ripen--mangoes and melons are especially fragrant!--and vegetables should smell fresh. A moldy odor is always a bad sign. Do a sniff-and-compare test to find the range of that particular fruit/vegetable and then choose accordingly.

[Touch] From firm skins to soft spots, touching a fruit/vegetable will let you know where it really stands. Is that a bruise on the peach, or is the whole fruit soft and ready to eat? Only touch will tell. And how soft/firm should individual produce be? Think of its texture when you've eaten it before. Apples, pears, onions, garlic, snap peas, lettuce...those taste best when they're crisp and crunchy. Peaches, mangoes, avocados, plums...those have more flavor when they're soft and ripe. Tomatoes get mealy when they're over-ripe, but you don't want them rock-hard, either. Roots and tubers--like potatoes, ginger root, beets, etc.--should be firm to the touch and not wrinkled. They can still be eaten when they're older, but they'll be more fibrous and their taste will have peaked.

Knowing when you want to consume your produce will also help you choose what level of ripeness you're looking for--do you want that kiwi four days from now? Tomorrow? If you time it right, you can have fresh produce at the height of its flavor, all week long without having to go back to the store.

The best way to learn how to choose produce is by trial and error; eventually, you'll have a sixth sense for choosing the juiciest limes and the sweetest pineapples. Until then, if you are unsure about what you should be looking for, find the produce manager and ask! Or consult a book like *Joy of Cooking* for some inside knowledge before you hit the grocery aisles.

Happy hunting! Lisa Howard

Lisa Howard is a Culinary Author and Food Coach who loves to travel the world in search of new flavors and fresh ingredients. As a Food Coach, she also helps people understand the connections between food and wellness and how we can all take charge of our health. If you'd like to learn more, please visit her e-kitchen at www.theculturedcook.com. You're also welcome to register for her upcoming event at Bodyworks Healing Center in Plymouth: *Becoming an Educated Eater*. The talk will be held on June 2nd from 7:00 to 9:00 p.m. Please contact Bodyworks for more details: (734) 416-5200.

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